

Improving Mentoring for Beginning Alternatively Certified Teachers: Is Functional Feedback a Viable Means?

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Despite a plethora of studies that describe the characteristics of effective mentors and the qualities of effecting mentoring initiatives, the research does not examine the nature of written feedback provided to beginning alternatively certified teachers. In addition, there is a gap in the literature that identifies the most useful type of feedback that enhances instructional practice as part of the mentoring process. This qualitative study examined written feedback provided to 20 beginning alternatively certified teachers. The findings support the use of functional feedback for mentoring and suggest that alternatively certified teachers perceived functional feedback as more useful.

Key words: Alternate Certification, mentoring, functional feedback, non-functional feedback.

To fill teacher vacancies, policymakers and school officials continue to open new avenues to certification by hiring teachers with limited or no prior classroom experience. Many of these teachers seek teaching credentials through alternative certification programs, “a process that by necessity must be compressed in a fast-track program” (Maloy, Seidman, Pine, & Ludlow, 2006, p. 117). The number of teachers entering the profession through alternative pathways as a response to teacher attrition has increased even when state-mandated standards and exams hold schools and teachers accountable for student success, and the rate of teachers leaving the profession continues to rise (Bess, 2007; Honawar, 2008; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2007). “By 2002, 45 states offered alternative routes to certification” and varied in the approach to grant certification (Suell & Piotrowski, 2007, p. 57).

The majority of beginning alternatively certified teachers have very limited to no classroom experience and probably have not experienced student teaching. Their pedagogical instruction is usually fast-paced and transmitted through a combination of online learning and face-to-face training sessions at night, on weekends, or intense weekly meetings usually during the summer.

Because many newly alternatively certified teachers are hired immediately before the school year starts or even after the school year has started, their immediate needs will focus on the day-to-day survival as a classroom teacher, such as knowing what materials to use, understanding the school's policies and procedures, and generally becoming familiar with working in a school setting. (Simmons, 2005, p. 41)

Consequently, they must rely heavily on their respective mentors or field supervisors for guidance and instructional and emotional support. This attention is especially important because much of their knowledge and skill is developed while on the job. Given that new teachers "require time to develop the complex repertoires of behavior necessary to succeed in the classroom even when provided with unusually high levels of support and direct feedback" (Schaffer, Stringfield & Wolfe, 1992, pp. 189-190), the nature and frequency of written feedback provided to beginning alternatively certified teachers merits a valid examination. Since the mentor is often the major provider of feedback to the mentee, the "amount and type of feedback provided" is critical in the development of the beginning educator (Shantz & Ward, 2000). While established mentoring programs exist, the mentoring process is complex and too often does not successfully address the needs of most beginning teachers, especially teachers who enter the profession through alternative routes.

To address this issue, the purpose of this qualitative investigation was to examine written feedback provided to beginning alternatively certified teachers by their mentors and this author, in the role of field supervisor. In addition, by examining the nature and usefulness of written feedback, I describe functional feedback and posit that it seems to be most useful to alternatively certified teachers. While the extant literature defines and describes the nature and various kinds of feedback, none delineate what I describe in this study as functional feedback. Functional feedback is not just based on the mentor's experience in the classroom, but, rather, draws on the mentor's own breadth and depth of theory and pedagogical knowledge to provide clear and precise feedback that is congruent to the mentee's teaching context. These comments are provided to influence growth and to enhance personal competence, thus becoming functional for the person receiving the feedback (Garza, 2001). Understanding the nature of functional feedback may assist mentors, teacher leaders, administrators, and field supervisors to improve the quality and frequency of feedback provided to the beginning teacher.

Altering Behavior through Functional Feedback

Feedback is an effective tool used (a) to influence teacher learning (Stronge, 2002), (b) improve effectiveness in the classroom (Shantz & Ward, 2000), (c) enhance growth and development (Garza, 2001), and (d) promote self-efficacy (Chu, Jamieson-Noel, & Winne, 2000). In fact, feedback is most effective when comments are precise and provided in a timely manner (Scheeler, Ruhl, & McAfee, 2004). Feedback should

also be specific and clear, indicating what is effective and what needs improvement (Garza, 2001), and specific to the individual's needs (Wilkins-Canter, 1997).

Although the literature describes feedback as (a) "attributional," (Burnett, 2001, p. 16), (b) accurate (Sullivan & Glanz, 2000), (c) precise (Garza, 2001), (d) constructive (Chu, et al.), and (e) criterion-referenced (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001), the notion of functional feedback differs from these varied descriptions. Functional feedback is written comments provided to facilitate growth and to enhance personal competence, thus becoming functional for the person receiving the information (Garza, 2001). The mentor's classroom experience, coupled with a broader understanding of the nuances of teaching, form a framework from which to provide the mentee with feedback unique to the mentee's teaching context. First, functional feedback is deliberate because it targets specific teaching behaviors based on the classroom observation. Second, a mentor's functional feedback gives instructional guidance by highlighting practices that are effective and suggests ways to improve the instructional episode. Third, although feedback can be provided electronically, orally, in writing, or through nonverbal communication, this study focuses specifically on written functional feedback. Written functional feedback creates a symbolic permanent record that the beginning educator and the mentor can then review many times and use as a way to assess progress over time. Records of written feedback can also guide mentors to effectively address the mentee's stage and level of development.

Ponticell and Zepeda (2004) suggest providing feedback relevant to the novice teacher's immediate needs which can then be used by the mentee to reflect and initiate his or her own plan for improvement. While some scholars (Scheeler, McAfee, Ruhl, & Lee, 2006) provide evidence that immediate, constructive feedback influences teacher behaviors, not much is known about the usefulness and nature of written feedback provided to beginning teachers certified through either university or alternative certification programs.

Mentoring Beginning Teachers

Adult learning involves seeking assistance; therefore, it is not surprising that beginning teachers would expect to be told how to improve their teaching (Ponticell & Zepeda, 2004). Mentoring relationships, in which a new teacher is guided by a more experienced colleague, provide novice educators with support needed to navigate the systemic and instructional aspects of the profession. The discourse on teacher mentoring focuses on the roles experienced educators utilize to minimize the hardships and emotional drawbacks they experience. Although the extant literature describes the characteristics of effective mentors and mentoring practices, there is little focus on the use of written feedback, formative or summative, as a tool to mentor beginning teachers. Moreover, the nature of written feedback that mentors provide to beginning teachers certified through a university or alternative pathway and the usefulness of the comments is limited; few studies have examined feedback in such environments (Ovando & Trube, 2000). New possibilities to refine existing mentoring practices that will effectively benefit our beginning alternatively certified teachers, such as providing

functional feedback, is worth considering, especially when state assessments and No Child Left Behind are used to profile effective teachers and schools.

Methodological Considerations

This qualitative study used a grounded theory approach and constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to examine mentor written feedback provided to teacher mentees. This approach allows the data to drive the development of theoretical explanations related to the phenomenon of study (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). As Charmaz affirms:

Grounded theory methods consist of systematic inductive guidelines for collecting and analyzing data to build middle-range theoretical frameworks that explain the collected data. Grounded theorists develop analytic interpretations of their data to focus further collection which they use in turn to inform and refine their developing theoretical analysis. (2003, p. 250)

This is important because it allowed the author to create relevant themes and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. This interpretive methodology is framed within the theoretical underpinnings of the mentoring process (Bey & Holmes, 1992; Odell & Huling, 2000). Mentoring provides a model for one-to-one interaction with the assumption that the protégé will gain assistance and support for growth and development.

This investigation focused on the nature of written comments that novice alternatively certified teachers received from their mentors and myself, in the role of field supervisor. The research questions that guided this inquiry were the following:

- What is the nature of the feedback provided to beginning teachers?
- What teaching behaviors does written feedback target?
- What kind of feedback seems useful to the beginning teacher?

Participants

The study included 20 beginning teachers enrolled in an alternative certification program for educators in the southern part of the United States during their initial academic school year. Purposeful sampling was used to identify the participants: “This means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). The author identified with 40 teachers and their mentors from different school districts, but narrowed it to one district because the large urban school district provided the diversity of demographics, socio-economic status, teaching areas, and sizes of schools. The 20 teachers were selected because they were all in the same school district, taught in an elementary, middle, or secondary school setting, and teaching areas included mathematics, bilingual, general elementary, and special education.

Generally, candidates wishing to be certified through the alternative program begin their preparation in the spring. The beginning teachers completed a weeklong orientation, receiving information on best practices in the classroom, pedagogical skills and knowledge, classroom management and discipline, and special education issues. Although the research site was limited to one school district, the study focused on the feedback alternatively certified teachers received on their classroom performance. Since this study examined the feedback provided to the beginning alternatively certified teacher, the influence of school environment, student demographics, or teaching content area was not a focus of this study.

Mentors

Each school campus was responsible for assigning a mentor from the respective campus to each of the participants in this study. Some mentors volunteered while others were assigned by the school principal. Purposeful sampling was also used to select the mentors (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, only those mentors who were assigned to the participants in the alternative certification program were invited to participate. Mentors' teaching experience ranged from two years to thirty-five years in the classroom. The mentoring experience was new to some mentors while others had mentored student teachers or other alternatively certified teachers previously. The beginning alternatively certified teachers were asked to explain to their respective mentor the purpose of this study and to invite them to participate. Those who agreed to participate were aware that only their feedback would be used as part of the study.

Mentors attended an orientation session explaining the educator preparation program's expectations, the mentor's role in guiding the beginning alternatively certified teacher, and training on how to conduct the required classroom observations. In addition, mentors were provided with training on how to provide written feedback to their mentee. Mentors were expected to return a copy of the written feedback forms to the author. This orientation session was followed a month later with a six-hour session to provide mentors with strategies to effectively address the beginning teachers' needs. For example, in-depth information about the mentor's role as well as how to effectively conduct a pre-conference meeting, collect data during a classroom observation, confer with a teacher after an observation, and provide written feedback was provided during the meeting.

Data Sources

Data were collected through (a) classroom observation, (b) mentor written feedback, and (c) focus group interview. The first method of data gathering was a series of classroom observations the author conducted in the role of supervisor. Each participant was observed teaching at least three times during the academic school year. Observing teachers in the educational setting is important because "one key authentic way to capture data is from classroom observations" (Zepeda, 2006, p. 108). The purpose of the classroom observations was to identify effective teaching behaviors and

identify areas of improvement. Although written feedback was provided in both areas, only the written feedback provided for improvement by the mentors and the author is the focus of this study.

The next data source consisted of the written comments mentors provided to the mentees. The purpose of the discussions was to provide written and oral feedback to the beginning alternatively certified teacher and to identify future goals or actions to improve teaching behaviors. Mentors facilitated the discussions in a timely manner, usually immediately after the lesson.

The third data source consisted of a focus group interview. Although all 20 alternatively certified teachers were invited to participate, 10 volunteered, and only six participated in the interview. The purpose of the focus group interview was to member check, and collect additional data about feedback and the participants' perspectives on their experience being mentored (Morgan, 1997). After the author acknowledged their contributions to the research investigation, they were reminded to respect each other's confidentiality. The author then gave the participants an opportunity to ask any questions before completing the interview process. The author developed focus group questions related to the five themes that emerged from data reduction. The author followed the steps outlined by Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) in preparing for the interview: "(a) defining the purpose of the study; (b) selecting a sample; (c) designing the interview format; (d) developing questions; (e) and conducting the interviews" (p. 307).

Data Analysis

The data consisted of (a) the authors written feedback to the teachers, (b) the mentors' written feedback to the teachers, (c) and the focus group notes. The data sources were analyzed using qualitative data reduction strategies in order to manage, categorize, and interpret data to identify different kinds of feedback (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The author started out with open-coding of my written feedback and clustered the codes into themes. "Open coding is the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 101). The author next coded the mentor written feedback using the same process. Then, through constant comparative analysis and axial coding, the separate lists were sorted, assigned a color code, and placed into preliminary categories before combining into one list (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Charmaz, 2006). Before establishing a final list of themes and descriptive units, three non-participating researchers reviewed the separate lists and provided comments. After further extensive data reduction, six main themes emerged from the data, each with corresponding descriptive units which have been referred to as critical attributes. The critical attributes reflect actual or paraphrased written comments provided to the participants by the mentors and author. After a non-participating researcher reviewed the themes and provided feedback, the critical attributes were then identified as functional or general.

Results and Discussion

The primary purpose of this investigation was to examine written feedback provided to 20 alternatively certified teachers to identify and describe the nature of the comments. The author argues that functional feedback is more useful than general feedback. The research questions that guided this inquiry were the following:

- What is the nature of the feedback provided to beginning teachers?
- What teaching behaviors does written feedback target?
- What kind of feedback is useful to the beginning teacher?

The written feedback was categorized into six dominant themes: (a) instructional strategies I; (b) classroom management; (c) positive reinforcement; (d) rules, procedures and routines; (e) classroom climate; and (f) instructional strategies II. Table 1 shows the themes, ordered according to the frequency analysis of written comments made in each theme.

Table 1

Nature of feedback provided to beginning teachers

Theme	No. of times identified by written comment
Instructional Strategies I	89
Classroom Management	62
Positive Reinforcement	45
Rules, Procedures, and Routines	37
Classroom Climate	35
Instructional Strategies II	34

Instructional strategies I, the theme with the most written comments, refers to the instructional scaffolds teachers use to maximize student engagement and achievement and actively engage students to promote meaningful learning. An example in this theme includes providing students with a prompt to elicit desired responses. Data suggest classroom management was also a major area of focus. This theme reflects actions to effectively organize and manage students, the culture for learning, instruction, and the physical space to maximize student learning. Effective classroom management is an important element conducive to a successful learning environment (Danielson, 1996). This finding is congruent with previous research identifying classroom management as a high concern to the beginning teacher (Cruickshank, Jenkins, & Metcalf, 2006). Positive reinforcement was also an area that received comments. This theme refers to affirming expected standards of conduct or student participation and contributions during a learning task. Although the last three themes received fewer comments than the first three, the data suggest the beginning teachers were more effective in implementing preventive mechanisms, such as rules, procedures, and routines, to facilitate instruction. Classroom climate refers to the

atmosphere or the tone of the learning environment and suggests the teachers were better able to create and foster a culture for learning where students feel safe, respected, and academically supported. Instructional strategies II, the theme receiving the fewest number of comments, reflects the components for conducting a lesson. The data suggest the teachers in this study were more knowledgeable in this pedagogical aspect. In other words, preparing and implementing a lesson plan was a strength.

Findings in this study revealed that some of the beginning alternatively certified teachers did not receive written feedback while others were provided with limited written feedback. Considering the vast amount of written feedback provided by the mentors and the author, a frequency analysis of the written comments revealed that the author, in a role as supervisor, contributed the most written feedback to the participants. In addition, most of that feedback was functional in nature. The majority of the written feedback provided to the alternatively certified teachers focused on instructional strategies and classroom management. I begin the discussion by describing the type of written feedback that is functional in nature and end with a description of general feedback, comments that may be ineffective in nature to the beginning teacher.

Types of Feedback

Functional Feedback. In this study, functional feedback is defined as written comments that extend beyond the mentor's classroom experience to theory and pedagogical knowledge relevant to instruction. Feedback is provided to enhance instructional competence, to target specific teaching behaviors based on classroom data, and to highlight practices that are effective and those that need improvement.

Table 2 shows examples of functional feedback provided to beginning alternatively certified teachers in this study. The critical attributes represent actual or paraphrased written comments that reflect a clear purpose and the suggestion is supported with a concrete example. Table 2 also provides examples of how functional feedback becomes non-functional in nature. The same comment lacks a clear purpose and the suggestion is unclear.

Table 2
Examples of functional feedback

Functional Feedback	Non-functional Feedback
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide positive reinforcement for appropriate behavior. • Encourage students to clap for classmates after presentations. • Review rules and procedures with students before beginning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide positive reinforcement. • Encourage students. • Review rules and procedures.

the activity.

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| • Start class and tasks promptly when the bell rings. | • Start class and tasks promptly. |
| • Use manipulatives to teach the objective. | • Use manipulatives. |
| • Ask a question, have students discuss with a partner, then call on students to share. | • Ask students to share. |
| • Secure all students' attention before giving directions. | • Secure students' attention. |

Functional feedback is specific, accurate, clear, and the beginning teacher needs no further explanation, (Garza, 2001). A beginning teacher understands the intent of the feedback without having to seek further clarification. Participants' perceptions of functional feedback were positive and they explained why it was useful to them. One novice teacher pointed out, "When it came to the feedback, I mean the feedback that you [author] gave me was so much better because it was more detailed and gave me suggestions that I can actually use." Another stated, "There was a big contrast in your [author] feedback: the validity that I gave to it; what kind of sense it made to me; and the spirit in which it was offered. The feedback was much more constructive and helpful."

"Your feedback was very direct and touched some of the same things as the mentors'," commented another beginning educator. Functional feedback targets specific teaching behaviors for improvement and provides precise information on how to improve those behaviors. The mentees' comments indicate that the suggested approaches for improvement were perceived as useful and the written feedback as valuable. Functional feedback conveys a message that is precise and, therefore, not open to interpretations as implied by the following comments. A beginning alternatively certified teacher explained, "You [author] would go to something specific and say well right here when you said this and that you should have or would have been a good idea and add or suggest something." Written feedback was used as an assessment tool rather than to evaluate the participants, and the participants' perceived the comments as precise and accurate (Shantz & Ward, 2000). Another mentee commented,

The feedback from my mentor and yourself [author] were similar in the fact that y'all were saying a lot of the same things or observed a lot of the same things that you had taken from the class. You can see and better implement your instructions from that stand point.

When written feedback is precise and targets specific teaching behaviors, it has the potential to influence instructional competence (Jones, Wickstrom, & Friman, 1997). Feedback that is specific in nature, rather than general, and builds upon the beginning teacher's strengths was perceived as useful by these participants. Advice that targeted

the instructional process as well as emotional support was tailored to the educator's stage of development rather than a checklist of prescribed teaching behaviors. Although the sampling of comments are few, they communicate the potential that functional feedback has for enhancing beginning teachers' teaching behaviors (Noell et al., 2005; Reinke, Lewis-Palmer, & Merrell, 2008).

Non-functional Feedback. The findings also revealed that the participants received a wide range of written feedback. Some received precise feedback that was functional in nature while other written comments were non-functional, or no written feedback was provided to some beginning teachers (Sullivan & Glanz, 2000). As one participant stated, "My mentor gave me general advice, very little, and nothing concrete." The nature and timeliness of the feedback is critical to teacher development (Scheeler, Ruhl, & McAfee, 2004). Table 3 shows examples of non-functional feedback provided to beginning alternatively certified teachers in this study. Table 3 also identifies examples of how to make the feedback functional. For example, the comment, *praise students*, does not provide enough information. Does the statement mean to praise students for their actions, behavior, attitude, work ethic, or success on a task? In other words, the statement can have many interpretations. The feedback's vagueness fails to provide functional information that can be used to improve classroom teaching behaviors.

Another example, *validate student success*, also conveys an unclear message. As a beginning teacher, I would ponder several questions to try to understand this comment. How do I validate student success? At what point in the lesson do I validate student success? How does my mentor define student success? The beginning teacher's ability to construct knowledge through relevant and meaningful experiences is influenced by selecting information that is most useful (Rogers, 1969). Improving the quality of written feedback provided to beginning alternatively certified teachers is one aspect of the mentoring process that may contribute to professional growth and self-efficacy.

Table 3
Examples of general feedback

Non-functional Feedback	Functional Feedback
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Praise students. • Validate student success. • Use more positive reinforcement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Praise students when they demonstrate an improvement in their behavior. • Validate the student's success by writing a positive comment on a returned paper. • Use positive reinforcement when students contribute to the discussion with comments such as excellent point, good comment, super, etc.

- Avoid wasted time to develop between activities.
 - Engage students cognitively.
 - Structure activities for students to follow.
 - Organize, prepare, and set up each activity ahead of time in order to avoid wasting time between activities.
 - Engage students cognitively by asking them to write a response to a question.
 - Structure activities for students to follow by providing a written agenda on the board and written instructions.
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As beginning teachers implement and modify existing instructional techniques and strategies based on suggestions provided by another party, the objective is to help the educators grow, not to confuse or to frustrate with unclear feedback. Feedback should provide guidance to the mentee to improve the dynamics of teaching, which ultimately benefits students. Providing functional feedback may be an approach to alter instructional behaviors and to enhance teacher growth by clearly communicating information about teaching behaviors (Zepeda, 2006).

The findings suggest that although most mentees received written feedback, inconsistencies existed in the nature and usefulness of written feedback. The ability to provide constructive feedback to the mentees may have influenced the quality and usefulness of written feedback (Reiman & Edefelt, 1990). Even though the mentors attended (Note: Is a word missing here?) capacity building for documenting classroom behaviors through observation, the degree of familiarity and consistency with their role may have affected the amount of the feedback provided (Zepeda, 2006). The following mentee echoes this sentiment: “I think more feedback could have been beneficial to me in the beginning. I felt like I wasn’t observed soon enough for me. It would have been really good at least once a month.”

While the literature describes effective mentoring practices, the mentors’ varied degree of providing written feedback may also suggest that some of the mentors may not have been as comfortable or confident in their role as others were (Arnold, 2006; Poulter, 2005; Zepeda, 2006). In addition, relying on knowledge and skills rather than using an instrument with prescribed behaviors suggests the need to be very familiar with a larger scope of pedagogical skills to provide functional feedback (Schaffer, Stringfield, & Wolfe, 1992). Some of the mentors may not have had the skills and pedagogical knowledge to provide functional feedback (Millinger, 2004). As Neal (1992) explains, “Only teachers – those who are masters of their craft, who can convey its subtleties and nuances to another, and who are willing to provide assistance for the sake of another’s growth – can function as true mentors” (p. 38). As one mentee affirms, “My mentor gave me general advice, very little, and nothing concrete.” Since beginning teachers focus more time on surviving that first year and less on reflecting

on how to improve their pedagogical knowledge and skills, mentors must realize that providing clear and accurate feedback is more effective and useful to a mentee than vague comments. Providing clear choices and telling a mentee exactly what to do are more helpful characteristics of effective mentoring. Calvin, Flannery, Sugai, and Monegan, (2009) advocate that “schools must establish assessment and feedback systems that give educators specific information on what they are doing and what effect their actions have on student performance” (p. 100). It is important to note that the mentors and the author, in the role of field supervisor, relied on classroom experience and knowledge in providing written feedback to beginning teachers rather than using an instrument with a checklist of prescribed teaching behaviors.

Furthermore, differing levels of teaching experience of mentors and the supervisor may have also influenced the lenses of effective teaching practices and classroom behaviors. A beginning teacher exclaimed, “I don’t think that her [mentor] classroom management matched anything that I ever learned about classroom management. I don’t think she is very good in a classroom.” Airasian (2008) points out, “Over time through observations and experience, teachers establish levels of tolerance that indicate what is normal student or class behavior (p. 102). Therefore, normal class and teacher behavior to one individual might be perceived differently by another, resulting in inconsistencies in the type and nature of written feedback. On the other hand, “many experienced teachers have been at the craft for so long that they have forgotten what they did not know at the beginning” (Millinger, 2004, p. 67). As a result, feedback provided by the mentor might not have been supporting the novice teacher’s immediate needs and stage of development but, rather, a perception of what effective teachers should exhibit in the teaching environment.

Finally, while most mentors were assigned or asked to participate, the mentors’ commitment to mentoring might have influenced the quantity and type of feedback mentees received. One beginning teacher exclaimed,

My mentor did not choose to be a mentor. She was sort of appointed to be a mentor. That had an effect on our relationship as a teacher mentor and also she was going through some personal things that affected her professionally. That also kind of damaged our teacher mentor relationship.

This example further reinforces the notion that “successful mentoring situations are dependent upon a good match between the new alternatively certified teacher and the mentor” (Simmons, 2005, p. 41). Mentors must be committed to the task and consciously provide quality time and assistance if our beginning teachers are to grow professionally and enhance their pedagogical knowledge and skills.

While some of the alternatively certified teachers endured negative experiences with their mentors, others felt supported and encouraged by the mentoring relationship (Smith & Evans, 2008). “My mentor always had my back, always behind me, always backing me up even when teachers that you have known for twenty, thirty years were

making unfair negative comments about me simply because I was a first-year teacher.” These differing experiences suggest the importance of positive interactions in establishing a trusting relationship that may lead to promoting effective communication and guidance (Bernstein, 2007; Prosise & Heller, 1993). Another novice teacher stated that the mentor was “not friendly, impatient and seemed resentful whenever asked for time and help.” “Good mentoring must be a personal and professional engagement, with the will and ability to share understandings and values” (Sundli, 2007, p. 213). These negative experiences support previous research by indicating that commitment to guide a novice teacher is a critical aspect of the mentoring process (Reiman & Edefelt, 1990).

Whereas some beginning alternatively certified teachers received limited to no feedback from the mentor, the results support a low commitment level rather than a strong desire to guide and support the mentee with functional feedback (Holden, 1995). In addition, the lack of interaction between some of the beginning teachers and their mentors validates the importance of developing a mentoring relationship (Fluckiger, McGlamery, & Edick, 2005).

Methodological Limitations

This study is limited by the authors gathering of data in the role of field supervisor and researcher. The author as a human instrument, categorized the data and interpreted the themes that emerged, although feedback was provided by a non-participating researcher. Human bias and subjectivity might influence the results of this investigation; other researchers attempting to sort and categorize the data in this study might have different results and labels. The selection of participants may also be a contextual limitation. Selecting participants from varied school districts might provide different results, especially since this study was limited to one school district.

Concluding Thoughts

Considering the dynamics and complex structure of quality mentoring, functional feedback may be influential in mentoring a novice administrator, teacher, student teacher, or field-based intern. When we consider the importance and influence of feedback in the instructional process, the quantity and nature of feedback must be considered as part of the mentoring process. “Schools must establish assessment and feedback systems that give educators specific information on what they are doing and what effect their actions have on student performance” (Calvin, et al., 2009, p. 100). Since mentors are critical players in providing feedback, school leaders might examine whether or not mentors are knowledgeable about the “impact of observational data” and skilled at presenting feedback effectively (Zepeda, 2006, p. 114). Although mentors are able to provide experiential knowledge about teaching based on successful and effective classroom experiences, their feedback may be strengthened by developing mentors’ deeper understanding of the “nature and purpose of written feedback” (Spear, Lock, & McCulloch, 1997, p. 278).

The findings suggest that improving the quality of feedback is valued by beginning teachers, and functional feedback that targets the individual's immediate needs may be instrumental in enhancing pedagogical growth. Ovando and Trube (2000) agree: "Formal feedback is essential to build alternative certified teachers' capacity" (p. 362). Therefore, it is critical for mentors to possess the knowledge and skill to effectively conduct classroom observations and to provide functional feedback. Whereas alternative pathways to certification provide different approaches to the classroom teaching experience, beginning teachers require mentoring support conducive to the appropriate teaching needs and strengths (Smith & Evans, 2008).

Assisting novice teachers to successfully plan lessons, deliver instruction, and assess students, in addition to the overwhelming task of surviving the first year, require a conscious commitment from mentors and from those responsible for designing and implementing induction and mentoring programs. Practitioners who recognize the potential of functional feedback can be instrumental in the success of our beginning educators by improving the quality and quantity of written feedback.

Additional research is still needed to answer further questions. Why do some mentors provide more feedback than other mentors? Do factors, such as gender, ethnicity, years of experience, and job responsibilities, influence the amount and type of feedback mentors provide to their mentee? What is more useful to mentees, feedback from a prescribed instrument or functional feedback? Therefore, mentors may need appropriate capacity building to develop skill in observing and recording teaching behaviors to provide functional feedback. In addition, approaches to classroom management, assessment, and instruction must also be current with best practices and theory to provide feedback conducive to the mentee's pedagogical context, rather than limited to the mentor's successful methods.

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